Strength from the Basics

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When your energy is limited, either through aging or illness, you want to be able to make the most of the strength you still have. Remember, as long as you’ve got breath, you’ve got some strength someplace. And if you haven’t reached that point where you’re feeling limited by aging or illness, you’ve got to prepare yourself, because the time will come. So there are two things to keep in mind. One is you want to keep your priorities straight. Focus on the basics. Focus on the really important issues in life. If there’s something you can’t manage, well, let that be in the area that’s not important. I noticed after John Suat had his accident, he suffered some brain damage, and he didn’t have much energy to give Dhamma talks. So when he did give a Dhamma talk, he would almost always be on the topic of the triple refuge, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is the basic teaching. Thinking about the Buddha reminds us of what can be done with the human life, and it gives us good examples. I was talking with someone yesterday who was explaining why she wanted to go to a Jhammahabhava’s funeral, and she said it was his example of always being willing to fight that kept her going in the difficult parts of her practice. And so it’s good that we have that. We have these examples of people who kept up the good fight, put forth the effort to do something really good with their lives, to remind us that that’s where the value of human life lies. And if you don’t put up the good fight, what have you got? Well, it’s hard to say that you’ve lost, because you haven’t even fought. So at the very least, when you find yourself facing examples, when you find yourself facing limitations, push against the limitation. Don’t let it make you collapse. So this is why it’s good to remember the Buddha. Of course, then there’s the Dhamma, the teaching he gave. It reminds us of how valuable this is, that we have a teaching like this. It’s not going to be around all the time, but we’ve got it now. Think about it, learn about it, think about it, put it into practice. It’s available all the time, which will not always be the case. So here again, it’s good to remember what the basics are. Generosity, virtue, meditation, or virtue, concentration, and discernment. Keep focusing on the basics, even though they may seem awfully simple. Virtue are just rules to hold by. We may not feel we’re very creative in holding to the rules, or that we’re expressing ourselves. But then again, there are parts of life where self-expression and creativity are not the things that you need to bring. You need to bring a willingness to train. A willingness to cut off some old patterns of behavior that you may have liked. And to see what happens when you try to be as harmless as possible. Same with concentration. You’re trying to focus just on one thing, the breath. How many thousands and thousands of people have been focusing on the breath? Millions of people have been focusing on the breath over the past centuries. Then you’re willing to follow their example. This is where contemplation of the Sangha comes in as well. These were people who were willing to say, “Maybe we don’t have to forge a new path. Simply forge that path that the Buddha left behind. It may have some weeds overgrowing it right now, but you do your best to clear away the weeds. Try this ancient path.” The Buddha himself said it was an ancient path that he had discovered. The example he gave was someone who’d gone into the jungle and found an old road, an old path. So he was now way overgrown. But he was able to slash his way through and found this beautiful city. Again, it was in ruins, but it obviously had been prosperous at one time. So that’s what the Buddha did. He had rediscovered a path that was already there. It may not be all that creative. It may not give you that much opportunity to put a new stamp on the world someplace. But the fact that it’s been followed, and followed to such good effect by many, many people, should give you a clue that it’s something that’s worth tailoring your activity to, rather than you’re trying to tailor it to your preferences. So try to keep the basics in mind—the virtue, the concentration, the discernment, the example, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Never lose sight of the basics. As I say in Pali, give them weight. The word for respect is related to the word for weight. In other words, in your consideration of what you want to do and say and think, you may be weighing different options. Give a lot of weight to the options that have proven themselves in the past. Many times, they’re very simple things. In this practice we have of chanting every night, this goes way, way back. You can think of a lot of other creative things you might want to do in the evening, but then you remind yourself that there’s a purpose in this. Get certain ideas repeated over and over and over again, certain phrases. Certain passages get repeated over and over again. They really get into your bloodstream. They get into the rhythm of your body. You find when you’re walking, all of a sudden, you’re carrying the rhythm of the chant in your walk. It’s good to have it there. Because what’s going to be there if you don’t? Well, there are commercial jingles and pop songs and who knows what we’ve picked up from the past that’s embedded itself in our bodies and our minds. So the simple act of repetition helps embed good things in there so you can draw on them when you need them. Because it’s not the case that your strength will always be up. When it’s down, it’s good to have some things built in. Certain qualities, certain approaches, certain ideas, certain values. They can be your strengths when you need them. It’s like squirrels who cash away some nuts for the winter. You want to remind yourself that virtue, generosity, and meditation are really important things. So when your strength is down, as you’re getting sick, you remind yourself, say, with a breath. The breath is always there to help you. And you may find yourself getting into an unhealthy breathing rhythm. Well, where can you focus to get out of it? Focus your attention on the areas that are far, far away from that unskillful pattern. It may involve going out to your hands and your feet, and just being conscious of what it feels like from the inside to have a hand, what it feels like from the inside to have a foot. Just stay with that sensation. Learn where your strengths are and keep going. Make your priorities as clear as possible. So when the time comes that you have to pare things down, they get pared down to the essentials, the actual essentials. And you don’t find yourself throwing away your map or your essential food as you have to strip down what you can carry. As we chat about the triple gem every night, this is important. Remember the example of Ajahn Suwat? After his brain was damaged, he focused on the triple gem. He’d been chanting about it every day, every day, every day, for who knows how many years. And it gave him the strength he needed. Work on these really basic skills in the meditation. How to stay with your breath, where to focus in the body, the different places you can focus, where you’ve got the strength. Explore all the possibilities of the breath. So when you need them, the various strong spots will be there. And as some of your physical abilities get impaired, remember there are other places where you still have the ability. Make the most of that. There was a woman, a student of Ajahn Mahaprabhu, who was a doctor. She had a friend who had cancer. And so when the friend with cancer wanted to go stay with Ajahn Mahaprabhu, the old woman who was a doctor, she decided, “Well, I’ve got this knowledge of medicine. I’ll go along and be of help.” Ajahn Mahaprabhu gave talks almost every night while the two women were there. And then after they left, the doctor discovered that the other woman had been taping all the talks and giving them titles. And so she decided that she wanted to do something in commemoration of a friend who died a couple months after the visit. And so she transcribed the talks. She realized that her vision was failing her, but she still had enough vision left so that she could listen to the tapes and type. So that’s what she did. She made the most of the abilities she had. And as a result, we have two very important Dhamma books now. So it shows what can be done, even when your strengths are impaired, even when there’s illness moving in, even when aging is moving in. Think of the areas where you still have strengths, where you still have abilities. Make the most of them. Practice teachings on the reasons for being lazy and the reasons for being diligent. And in both cases, the outside circumstances are the same. It’s your attitude that makes all the difference as to whether you’re capable of putting in the effort or not. So work on that attitude. That always wants to find some goodness in a situation, as the Buddha said. Suppose you had your last meal with a person who really understood the virtue of sharing. He wouldn’t eat that last meal until he’d shared it with someone, as long as there was someone there to share with. So take the same attitude to all the varieties of goodness. They may seem commonplace and ordinary, but the commonplace and ordinary things are often the most important. So give them weight. Give them respect. Because they’re valuable. Those are the three different meanings of the word gardo in Pali. You give respect, something is heavy, weighty, and it’s valuable. So try to see all the basics in that light so you can show their value when you really need them.

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